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Military 'Fiasco' Really a Success

While the Reagan administration weighs its options for dealing with terrorism, it is relevant to examine the lessons learned from a remarkable U.S. military operation nearly 15 years ago: a commando raid on Son Tay, North Vietnam.

The raid was widely regarded as an intelligence fiasco, since the American prisoners who were supposed to be rescued were no longer there. In fact, it was nothing of the sort. U.S. intelligence was quite accurate, and the raid itself was carried out with superb skill.

What the Pentagon planners knew before the Son Tay raid and the surprising results have never been revealed. Here's the story:

On Nov. 21, 1970, a force of 60 elite commandos landed in a secluded compound 23 miles west of Hanoi, deep inside North Vietnam. The men were told their mission was to liberate as many as 80 American POWs being held there.

Not a single POW was found. Only North Vietnamese (and some Chinese) soldiers were on the premises. A brisk battle ensued. The enemy suffered up to 100 casualties; not a single American was killed. In fact, the only U.S. "casualty" was a commando who sprained an ankle.

The raiders were bitterly and understandably disappointed. They had apparently risked their lives for nothing. Who had blundered?

The overwhelming evidence is that no one had goofed. U.S. intelligence was reasonably certain there were no American POWs at Son Tay by the time of the raid. So why send the raiders in?

The chief planner of the raid, Gen. Donald T. Blackburn, told our associate Donald Goldberg years later: "We knew [the POWs] had been moved. We didn't want to give up the demonstration of power." The real purpose of the raid, he said, was to show the North Vietnamese how vulnerable they were.

There were intelligence gaps, though not over the central question of the presence or absence of Americans in the camp. An Army intelligence officer who worked on the raid told us recently that the Pentagon deliberately held down the number of reconnaissance drones that flew over the camp for fear of tipping the North Vietnamese to an imminent raid.

"The big thing was not whether there were POWs there or not," he explained, "but whether there was a North Vietnamese regiment there or not. We had to make sure that they would not set up a trap for the raiding force or we could have had 60 more POWs, which would have been disastrous."

The large number of troops the raiders encountered was a surprise, as was the quality of their weapons. In fact, a Central Intelligence Agency analyst later resigned over the raid, complaining that his boss, not wanting to admit he had no spies in the area, "estimated" that the enemy soldiers at Son Tay were armed only with old Japanese and French rifles, pitchforks and machetes. In fact, they had machine guns.

But, in retrospect, the raid was both a strategic and tactical success. It netted maximum military gain from a minimum risk of men and materiel.

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